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ABSTRACT

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EVALUATION OF STUDENT-WRITTEN ESSAYS AVAILABLE ON AN INTERNET SITE

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ABSTRACT

Are student-written reports posted on the Internet well written? Do business communications students think they are? This paper describes an assignment used during the first few weeks of a business communication course. The assignment gives business communication students a chance to evaluate a report from an Internet site that serves as a depository of student-written reports. The assignment provides two desired outcomes: (a) students have a chance to review approximately 25 writing style principles and (b) students realize that some Internet sites contain inferior material.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to analyze the writing style of student-written reports posted on an Internet site.

METHODOLOGY

Ninety-eight students in three undergraduate business communication courses (MGMT 3315) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi were assigned to evaluate the writing style of different short reports posted on an Internet site www.4freeessays.com. Students were assigned different reports to analyze for two reasons. First, requiring each student to complete his/her own report made it impossible for one student to copy another student's report. Second, by exposing students to more reports (98 instead of just 1) students were able to get a better feel for the overall quality of reports included.

Students evaluated their reports by performing three separate analyses using three separate tools: Grammatik software, concepts from an assigned journal article, and concepts from the course textbook.

After students downloaded their assigned short report, they copied it onto a Microsoft Word file. Students performed their initial analysis of the report by using the Grammatik program contained within Microsoft Word. The Grammatik analysis informed students of word, sentence, and paragraph lengths. It also identified passive voice sentences; readability level; and other general grammar, punctuation, and style issues.

The second analysis involved using concepts covered in a journal article on document design written by William H. Baker of Brigham Young University. The article informs readers that documents of

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CS 511 839

all sort should be formatted using concepts easily recalled with the acronym "HATS" (Headings, Access, Typography, and Spacing).

The third form of analyses required students to evaluate 19 principles covered in the course textbook, *Business Communication: Process & Product* by Mary Ellen Guffey. The 19 items fell under the categories of "Sentences" (sentence length, active voice, dangling and misplaced modifiers), "Paragraphs" (paragraph unity, paragraph length, coherence, paragraph organization), and "Clarity" (opening fillers, redundancies, and compound prepositions).

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study involved an analysis of short reports posted on a single Internet website: 4freeessays.com. It did not examine short reports posted on any other of the similar websites. Some of the other websites charge for the use of their reports whereas 4freeessays.com does not charge. If students had evaluated reports on some of the commercial websites, which likely contain better quality reports for sale, students might have drawn a different conclusion about the quality of reports posted on Internet sites.

The obvious limitation to the study was that students alone evaluated the short reports posted on the Internet web site. Some of the items the students evaluated are straightforward, so their findings should be reliable. For instance, evaluating the presence of headings is straightforward; the headings are in the report or they are not. Likewise, detecting whether the typeface is a serif font and the type size 11 point is easy to detect.

On the other hand, some of the items were more difficult to evaluate; evaluating these items required knowledge, skill, or experience possibly beyond what some students may have possessed. For instance, identifying paragraph unity requires a clear understanding of the concept and a careful, thorough reading of the paragraph. While some of the students confidently and correctly identified problems with these more difficult to identify problems, other students may have simply guessed.

It would have been helpful to have had more experienced writers, such as writing teachers, also examine the short reports. This practice would have provided a benchmark standard by which the accuracy of the student findings could have been checked.

FINDINGS

The students examined several macro-writing issues. Macro issues pertain "to the document as a whole" (Munter, 1997, p. 51). Most of the macro issue items students used in their analyses were taken from a journal article entitled, "HATS: A Design Procedure for Routine Business Documents." The results of those findings are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1

Evaluation of Document Format Issues in Selected Internet Reports
(as reported by students)

	CORRECTLY USED	INCORRECTLY USED
Headings	18%	82%
Access	09	91
Typeface	42	58
Type size	28	72
Type style	22	78
Alignment	100	00
External Spacing	77	23
Internal Spacing	82	18

Students first inspected their report for a purpose statement. The purpose statement is most effectively stated explicitly in the opening, introductory paragraph (Guffey, 372). The students found that a majority (68 percent) of the reports did provide some identification—in varying levels of specificity--of what would be covered within the report.

According to Guffey (2000), reports should contain at least one heading on every page to improve the report's readability and attractiveness. According to Baker (2001), reports should also contain text enhancements (such as bullets or numbers) or graphic aids (such as tables or charts) that emphasize certain types of information. Table 1 shows that both of these items were underdeveloped; only 18 percent of these reports contained headings and only 9 percent contained some form of access.

Typography was also poorly displayed in many of the Internet reports analyzed. Students were instructed to look for reports printed in a serif typeface (such as Times New Roman) of 11-point type size. Many reports instead were typed using a san serif typeface (Verdana) of 10-point type size. Another typography component, type style, was also not prominently used in the reports; fewer than a quarter of the reports (22 percent) had any form of type style (bold, underline, italics, etc.) that would have made key words or phrases stand out more. The typography component that was correctly used was that of alignment or text justification; according to Baker (2001), documents should use left-justified margins rather than full justification. Every study reported that his or her report used this form of alignment.

Effective documents use plenty of white space to create a pleasing visual appearance. In addition, documents with an appropriate amount of internal and external spacing make the document much easier to read. Students found that both the external spacing (77 percent) and internal spacing (82 percent) were appropriate as is.

The students examined several micro-writing issues. Micro writing involves "writing issues pertaining to sentence and word choice" (Munter, 1997, p. 51). The results of those findings are shown in Tables 2-4.

According to Guffey (2001), sentences should contain approximately 20 words because sentences longer than that adversely affect reading comprehension. Slightly more than half of the reports analyzed (58 percent) contained sentences within the recommended range, as shown in Table 2.

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Table 2

Evaluation of Sentence Issues in Selected Internet Reports
(as reported by students)

	CORRECTLY USED	INCORRECTLY USED
Sentence Length	58%	42%
Active Voice	24	76
Dangling Modifier	52	48

The remaining sentence concerns involve active voice and dangling modifiers. Active voice sentences are ones in which the subject of the sentence performs the action rather than receives the action as in passive voice sentences. For instance, this sentence is written in active voice: "The teacher dropped the eraser." The same idea placed within passive voice construction would be written like this: "The teacher dropped the eraser." Active voice is generally preferred because those "sentences are direct and easy to understand" (Guffey, 2001, p. 139). Nearly 75 percent of the reports contained problems with passive voice usage.

Students found that the reports contained fewer problems with dangling modifiers than with passive voice. Still, slightly more than 50 percent of the reports contained dangling modifier problems. "A modifier dangles when the word or phrase it describes is missing from its sentence" (Guffey, 2000, p. 140). Modifying words should be close to the words they describe.

Students found that paragraph-related items were performed slightly better than sentence-related items. Approximately 60 percent of the reports contained effective paragraph components, as shown in Table 3. Paragraph unity describes paragraphs in which a single idea is developed. Fifty-seven percent of the reports contained paragraphs that developed a single idea.

According to Guffey (2000), paragraphs should contain a main sentence that summarizes the main idea of the paragraph; the supporting sentences should develop the idea. The "direct plan" occurs when the main sentence appears at the beginning and the supporting sentences follow. These three items (main sentence, supporting sentences, and direct plan) were found to be correctly performed approximately 60 percent of the time.

Table 3

Evaluation of Paragraph Issues in Selected Internet Reports
(as reported by students)

	CORRECTLY USED	INCORRECTLY USED
Paragraph Unity	57%	43%
Main Sentence	53	47
Supporting Sentences	67	33
Direct Plan	60	40
Coherence	53	47
Paragraph Length	41	59

The paragraph item needing the most improvement was paragraph length. According to Guffey (2000), paragraphs should contain eight lines of text or fewer. According to the student analysis, only

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about 40 percent of the paragraphs consistently met this standard. Several reports developed all ideas in a single long paragraph.

"A clear message is one that is immediately understood" (Guffey, 2000, p. 153). Table 4 shows the results of several clarity issues. Using fewer words and language that is more conversational can help promote clarity. The analyzed reports generally performed well in using conversational language (67 percent) and avoiding trite expressions (85 percent). The reports contained more problems in other clarity areas, such as opening fillers (starting sentences with "it is" or "there is"), compound prepositions (i.e., "at this point in time," "due to the fact," etc.), and noun habits (i.e., "conduct a discussion of" instead of "discuss" or "engage in the preparation of" instead of "prepare," etc.).

Table 4

Evaluation of Clarity Issues in Selected Internet Reports
(as reported by students)

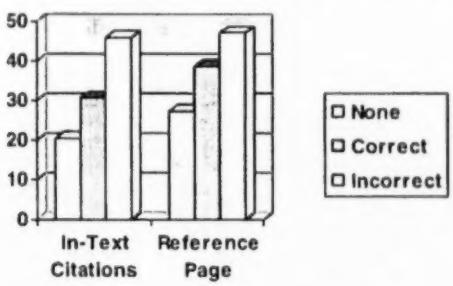
	CORRECTLY USED	INCORRECTLY USED
Conversational	67%	33%
Opening Fillers	41	59
Compound Prepositions	51	49
Noun Habits	52	48
Trite Business Expressions	85	15

Since the course doesn't cover secondary source documentation until later in the semester, students were not required to determine whether the report they analyzed contained proper documentation. Instead, when the instructor collected the assignment, he looked at the reports (which the students had copied and placed in the appendix of their assignments) and noticed whether they contained secondary source documentation within the report as well as at the end. If the reports did contain secondary source documentation, the instructor noted whether the citations were prepared properly.

Although not every report on the Internet site used secondary sources, a large majority of them did. The instructor, therefore, expected to find widespread use of documentation. However, the instructor found instead that a majority of reports contained no documentation either within the report (58 percent) or at the end (77 percent). In addition, a large number of report that did contain documentation prepared their citations incorrectly, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Evaluation of Documentation Issues in Selected Internet Reports



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CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Students concluded that the overall quality of reports that they analyzed on the Internet site 4freeessays.com was poor. Many of the reports contained obvious deficiencies, such as long paragraphs, no headings, and no form of typography. In addition, many reports also contained less obvious problems, such as overuse of active voice and opening fillers. These problems increase the reading difficulty of the reports.

Several recommendations are in order if this assignment is to be given again. First, students should be required to consult several different Internet sites that post reports written by students. In the current assignment students inferred that Internet sites contained poor quality reports because the only source they used did contain many poor quality reports. If students were exposed to multiple Internet sites, they may or may not reach the same conclusion.

The second recommendation would be to have experienced writers, possibly writing instructors, evaluate Internet site short reports to see if they reach the same conclusions as the students about the reports' overall quality. Another possible recommendation would be to compare the evaluation findings of the excellent students with the less capable students to see if there is any difference in evaluation between the two groups.

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